My sermon this ~~morning~~ morning is ..

AN ADEQUATE GLIMPSE OF THE TRUTH

April 9, 1989

8:30 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh

Scripture
Exodus 33:17-23
Luke 9:28-36

The text is .. Ex. 33:23

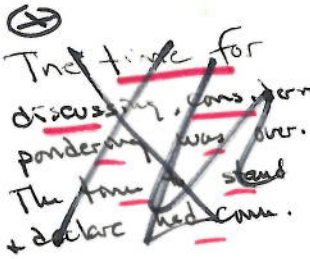
"Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

-Exodus 33:23

Among the wisest words ever said to me are these...

"What the Christian Church needs is more belief, not more beliefs."

It was said to me by a retired Presbyterian minister on an auspicious occasion in my life. I had just completed my Ordination trials, including preaching a sermon, submitting a paper on Biblical exegesis and presenting a statement of faith, which was read and then defended orally in front of the



entire Presbytery. Preparing that statement of faith was a harrowing experience. I had done what most candidates do, I have discovered. Namely, cover a lot of ground, touch every base from creation to human sin and salvation, from Bible to Church History to Eschatology, illustrating each point with a broad range of historical references,

I recall hoping that I could dazzle them and in fact, they were generous, and did vote me in. I was feeling pretty good when among the well wishers afterward there was this retired minister. I have remembered what he said with more gratitude than anything else that happened that day. He said he liked my statement of faith - but thought it was actually too big. He said that it was his experience the longer he lived, that he believed fewer things but believed them more: that his life had been a refining and sharpening. "Your statement of faith was good," he said, "but you don't have to believe all that. Focus on a few things and really believe in them... What the

Christian Church needs," he said, "is more belief and fewer beliefs."

There is in religion an almost irresistible inclination to explain everything, to reduce the infinite to finite, understandable terms; to reduce the great unknowns, the unfathomable mysteries of our existence to manageable dimensions. That is the theme of a wonderful story in the Book of Exodus which is delightful in its playfulness but profound in its humanness and its integrity.

The scene is Mt. Sinai in the middle of the wilderness. The children of Israel, recently escaped from Pharaoh at the Red Sea, are on the move, wandering through the Sinai desert. When they come to the mountain, God and Moses meet and talk. For thirteen chapters or so God and Moses converse and negotiate. Moses receives God's law, and when he takes the two tablets on which the law is inscribed down to the people, he discovers them worshipping an idol, a golden calf. In a fit of rage Moses dashes

the tablets to the ground, goes back up the mountain to resume the conversation with God and makes a simple request: Give me some proof that I'm on the right track. I badly need some credibility with these people. Do something to show how serious you are and how legitimate I am. At least tell me your plans. God's response to Moses is "I will go with you, and I will give you the victory."

That wasn't the question. So Moses tries again and gets an equally evasive answer. Moses is nothing if not determined, so he tries again but reduces his demands a bit. If you won't do something to give yourself -- and me -- some credibility, at least give me something to hold on to, some certainty. Let me see your glory -- which the translators tell us means "the dazzling light of God's presence." And then Moses gets an answer -- of sorts...

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, but you

cannot see my face." And then this wonderful little vignette, which can easily be missed -

"there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock;

and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock,

~~rock~~, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;

then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my

face shall not be seen." [~~Exodus 33:21-23~~]

It wasn't such an unreasonable request, really... not unlike what we want from our religion. A little certainty. He simply wanted a clear picture of who he was following and obeying. He wanted to be sure of himself at least before he pushed ahead into the wilderness ~~at the head of that long column of griping, whining, golden calf-worshipping people on their way to a promised land none of them had ever seen~~. It wasn't to be. No face-to-face encounters with God for Moses - yet.

Moses was going to have to settle for the back side of God... a less than complete theology. Moses was going to have to be content with some poor symbols of the reality of God instead of the real thing - the memory of a burning bush, two tablets of stone, a voice that was maddeningly silent when he wanted to hear it...

There is in religion an almost irresistible inclination to try to see God's face, to reduce the infinite to the finite.

Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that there is more religious confusion generated by "those who claim to know too much about the mystery of life than by those who claim to know too little." [The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, Mystery & Meaning, p. 237]

"They banish the mystery," he said. And then, with a twinkle in his eye, I am sure, "They know the geography of heaven and hell, and the furniture of one and the temperature of the other."

There is, of course, great appeal to a rational religion which has an answer for

everything.

In John Updike's novel, Roger's Version, a young computer [illegible] comes to a divinity school professor with a peculiar request. He wants a divinity school grant to prove the existence of God on a computer. He believes that if he can just crunch enough numbers, ultimate mystery will be revealed. "God is breaking through," he says. "They've been scraping away at physical reality all these centuries, and now the layer of the little left we don't understand is so fine God's face is staring out at us." [p. 20]

The Professor, Roger, responds - "I find your whole idea ~~aesthetically and ethically~~ repulsive. ~~Aesthetically because it describes a God who lets himself be intellectually trapped, and ethically because~~ it eliminates faith from religion, it takes away our freedom to believe or doubt. A God you could prove makes the whole thing immensely, oh, uninteresting. Pat. Whatever else God may be, he

shouldn't be pat."

"But sir, think of the comfort to all those who want to believe but don't dare, because they've been intellectually intimidated. Think of the reassurance to all those in trouble or in pain and wanting to pray."
[p. 24]

There is enormous appeal to a religion that reduces mystery, makes the infinite finite and encompasses the whole terrain of our humanness in a sequence of formulas everyone can understand.

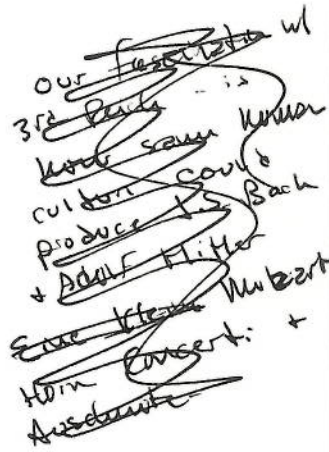
One time Jewish comedian, Woody Allen and Billy Graham were on the same television talk show. Allen was asked if he might convert on camera.

"I'm open to it. Life, it seems to me, is much easier if you're a believer. You can always come up with easy answers." [cited by Martin E. Marty, Context, Feb. 14, 1989, from Free Inquiry]

But it doesn't work. There is a mystery about us that defies explanation. If you have been in love you know that the experience is not

in biological or psychological terms only

adequately described ~~as "hormones calling to hormones."~~ If you have been privileged to witness human birth or human death you know that there is a moment when science is no longer adequate and that you are in the presence of mystery. ~~Human nature, capable of exquisite beauty and the grossest evil, cannot be explained simply.~~



My memory of the last funeral I attended as a worshiper and mourner, not as the presiding clergy, is one of irritation at the minister, a friend of mine, for talking too much. He said so much more than he had a right to say, I thought, much, much more than I wanted to hear. What happened was not simple. The life we were remembering was anything but simple. What the mourners were experiencing was not simple. It was offensive to be told that it is all really uncomplicated - when one knows one is in the presence of mystery.

The stuff of your life and mine is loving, yearning, hoping, dreaming, stretching, reaching beyond our grasp, sometimes succeeding and

sometimes falling flat on our faces, suffering, doubting, despairing, but also rejoicing, celebrating, praying, dying... Mystery, all of it; none of it able to be reduced to simple, understandable formulas or platitudes.

And that is consistent with our religion. Popular religion may try to know too much, but Biblical religion doesn't let you see God's face.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord." [Isaiah 55:8] is the way the prophet Isaiah put it.

The God of the Bible makes a point of it, it would seem. God doesn't give Moses a good look for Moses' own sake. In the Bible, if you see too much of God you die. If there is no mystery left you are no longer human, it would seem. If there is no mystery left you no longer have the option of faith.

During the Season of Eastertide, and the somber days of Lent which precede it, we are

invited to draw near to the mystery, to approach the unanswerable questions of life and love and sin and death and resurrection once again, not in hopes that this year we'll get it right and have the answers, because we will not. It does not appear that our Lord's disciples ever totally understood him. who he was. Their Lord - they believed, was God's good and loving word to the human family, but there is a sense in which he always stood apart from the family, never fully understood. There was always the mystery

"Who do you say that I am" he asked them once, and Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God," but then showed that he didn't understand.

On the Mt. of Transfiguration, when if anyone ever had a chance to look into the face of God, it was them. And they didn't understand. They were distracted, bored and sleepy.

And so it goes throughout, until this one, against all the rational common sense advice of his best friends, follows his sense of God's will and walks

into the valley of the shadow of death and literally climbs up onto a cross and dies. There, this faith of ours proclaims, at that final mystery, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, there the reality of God is unveiled, the truth about God and about us is disclosed.

~~In Lent we approach the mystery... and at the cross of Christ we stand under it. And~~ In these days of Eastertide - we live in the presence of ultimate mystery, the victory of life over death, the power of love to keep us forever safe...

In this life we may never see clearly. St. Paul, who was more sure of some things than anyone - confessed the mystery with a poignancy and integrity we have come to love...

"Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully,

even as I am fully understood." [1 Cor. 13:12]

The promise of the Gospel is not that we will

have answers to all our questions and that all our quandries and dilemmas will be solved. The promise of the gospel is that ultimately we will see God...

In the meantime, like Moses, we'll have to do with the back side of God, a glimpse of the truth, a hint of the glory. In the meantime, there is this man who lived and loved and died for us. And until that day when you and I see face to face, it is an adequate portion of the truth simply to allow him to love us, and to hold tightly to him. Amen.

In the name of the Fa

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